1857

Echo Canyon Fortifications Key Historical Point in 1857 Utah War

By SHIRLEY CHATWIN

Added dimension has been given to the history of Echo Canyon by a newly-constructed overlook area from which tourists can view the massive red sandstone cliffs where the Mormon Militia in 1857 built fortifications designed to hold back Johnston's army from passing through the canyon.

The overlook area is being landscaped and a monument has been erected that tells the history of the gallant group who manned the fortifications.

Peace was reached before the army reached that point, however, and the fortifications were never put to the test.

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Interesting Chapter

The Echo Canyon incident constitutes an interesting chapter in Utah history.

The incident was the result of friction between Mormons and "Gentile" appointees to positions in the Territorial Government in Utah. Several of these appointees had returned to the East with tales of alleged murder, destruction of government property, and general lawlessness under what they termed the dictatorship of Brigham Young.

Believing that Utah was in a state of rebellion, President James Buchanan ordered 2500 regular army troops to move into Salt Lake and bring the area "under control."

News Reaches Utah

The news of the advancing army reached Brigham Young and approximately 3000 Mormons, on July 24, 1857, at Brighton, where they were celebrating the 10th anniversary of the arrival of the Pioneers into the Valley of the Great Salt Lake.

The reaction to the news was to resist. The memory of Missouri and Illinois mob action was still vivid in the memory of the Mormons and they could not subject themselves to military rule.

The Utah Militia (still bearing the name of Nauvoo Legion) was given the task of stalling the army east of the Wasatch Mountains and detaining it there long enough for an investigation to disprove charges against them.

Strategy Outlined

The strategy was to fortify all routes leading into Salt Lake Valley and to harry wagon supply trains as they rolled west ward from South Pass.

Lt. General Daniel H. Wells was in charge of the campaign.

Major Lot Smith and his group were sent to the vicinity east and north of Fort Bridger to intercept the wagon trains.

Trains Burned

The first wagon train was encountered on Oct. 4 and the wagonmasters agreed to turn back rather than have their wagons burned. But this method of handling the problem proved unsuccessful for the wagons were turned around again as soon as the guerrillas had left.

The second train encountered consisted of 52 wagons, only one was left unburned. Soon after 23 other wagons were burned.

A total of 74 U. S. Army supply wagons and their cargoes went up in flames within a few days.

Holy Crusade

The feeling of resistance as a sort of a holy crusade is felt in Lot Smith's words during the burning of some of the wagons. "For God's sake, don't burn the the trains," begged Wagonmaster Dawson as Lot Smith prepared to apply the torch. "It is for His sake that I am going to burn them," replied Smith as he set about the incendiary business at hand.

In the event that Smith and his guerrillas should fail to halt the army, defense fortifications were built in Echo Canyon between Fort Bridger and Salt Lake. A narrow wagon road ran down the canyon at the foot of huge cliffs. On top of the cliffs crude walls were erected to provide cover for the riflemen.

Still Stand

After [illegible] some of the walls are still standing. Logs, charred to resemble cannon barrels were pointed over the walls to deceive the enemy.

Trenches were dug and dams thrown across Echo Creek to bog down an advancing army.

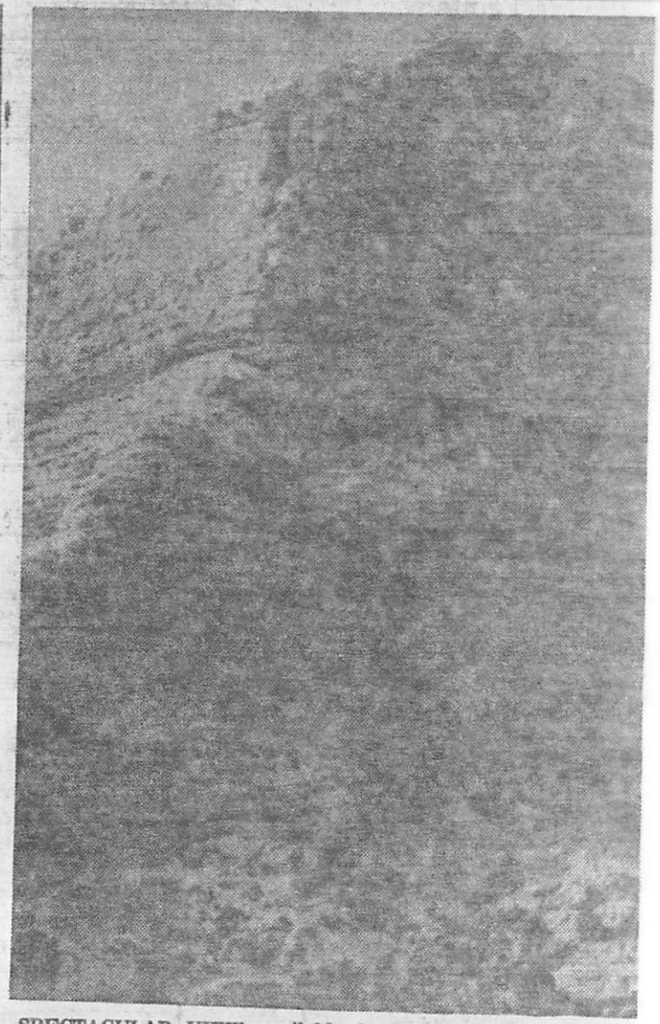
The Mormons had no opportunity to test their fortifications for the army made no attempt to move west from Fort Bridger before the spring of 1858. By that time it had become apparent to the newly-appointed Utah governor, Alfred Cumming, that there was no need to fight.

Night Journey

It was April when the new governor and his party were guided through Echo Canyon. Night time was chosen in order that the Mormon Militiamen might display their strength. Fires illuminated the canyon walls and left a lasting impression on the governor.

An agreement was finally reached between Governor Cumming, Brigham Young and General Albert Sidney Johnston (with the mediation help of Col. Thomas Kane) which resulted in the army peacefully marching down Echo Canyon, through Salt Lake City, and eventually to Cedar Valley west of Lehi where they established Camp Floyd.

The Utah War was over.



SPECTACULAR VIEW available from an overlook area of one of Utah's most historic spots, the Echo Canyon, along the new inter-state highway. It allows tourists the opportunity to view the massive cliffs where the Utah Militia built

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of Echo

Canyon

Fortifications